

CHAPTER ELEVEN

CARLOTA AND DEEMA

“When they heard the army was coming, they ran into the mountains to hide. But some of the women had very small children, and they couldn’t hide very well. So the army found them, and over there where they found them, they killed them.”

By 7:30 Wednesday morning we left the hotel for the drive to Dolores Medina roughly nine kilometers north of the outskirts of San Salvador, a community of about forty families in the larger, repopulated community of Calle Real.

“To the west of Calle Real looms the volcano of San Salvador,” Reid wrote later in the *Sacred Heart University Review*, “and to the northeast, in the distance, rises the volcano of Guazapa. On the weekday morning we traveled to Calle Real the highway, broken by long stretches of gravel and dirt roadway, was choked with traffic of cars, trucks, overcrowded buses, and pedestrians, most traveling south into the capital city.”⁸

Of the twenty-five thousand people residing in the several smaller communities of Calle Real, most, we were told, were either ex-combatants or *campesinos* displaced by the war. Established in 1986, Dolores Medina was the base of operations for Fr. Dave Blanchard, where he had devoted himself to setting up a faith-based community with self-sustaining micro-businesses.

“One of the children, a girl if eleven or twelve, met our van and welcomed us,” Trebon said. “She had been waiting. She grasped hold of my hand and said, ‘*Hola! Buenos Dias.*’ As we walked on to the village she held my arm as if to lead me to the house where our breakfast was to be served.”

Blanchard, dressed in a long-sleeved white cotton T-shirt, khaki shorts, and sneakers, greeted us then asked us to follow him down a cement walkway bordered by one-story brick houses, each with a large planter in front filled with bushes and flowers. A woman and two children waited for us at the far end of the walkway.

“You are the breakfast guests of Carlota and her family this morning,” Blanchard announced, introducing the woman, and leading us into her house past a room to the right and a kitchen to a small enclosed courtyard in the back. A six foot wall of concrete bricks stood to the left with a planter filled with flowers and vegetables. Red flowers decorated the other walls and burlap bags, shirts, and blouses hung on a clothesline. In a rear corner was the *baño*.

A pudgy two year old, decked out for the occasion in a flowered shirt, red shorts, and sneakers, sat in a child’s chair staring wide-eyed at us.

“That’s Kevin,” Blanchard said.

Kempton, taken with the young boy, motioned with her hands for him to come to her. His sister picked him up handed him over.

“Oh, Kevin,” she gushed, hefting him in her arms, “you are substantial!”

At that point, Blanchard introduced Rick Jones, a man in his mid-twenties with curly blond hair and a handsome Nordic face.

“Rick coordinated the first part of the DePaul trip the summer before,” he said, explaining that Rick decided to stay at Dolores Medina to help run the community enterprises.

We all sat around the oilcloth covered table while Blanchard, coffee cup in hand, began the conversation by talking about the community bakery.

"They make some incredible pastries," he beamed.

"How many people work there?" Willison asked.

"Three or four. They make twenty-five kinds of bread, rolls, and pastries. And recently they started making croissants. Now they are working to get a mixer."

In spite of the progress in the community, many items were still missing at Calle Real, Blanchard said. "We collect donations back in the States, but we need somebody to drive down with them."

"Get a truck," Willison said. "I'll drive down in August. Then I'll go back in September."

"How long does it take?" someone asked.

"I've done it in six days," said Blanchard. "I think it's about four thousand miles."

"That's nothing," said Willison. "I've done thirty days in a row."

After listening about his worldwide treks, I had no doubt: if he said he could do it, he could.

The women served heaping platefuls of corn tortillas made from corn mush baked in corn leaves, fried *platinos*, rolls from the pastry shop, and coffee. It was a feast. And while we ate we peppered Blanchard with questions. Kempton wanted to know the percentage of women in the National Police.

"There's a battalion of women in the National Police," he answered. "They are prepared for times of emergency."

"What about birth issues?"

"She is 'giving light now' is how Salvadoran women describe it," he said. "Roughly 50 percent of the babies are born at home with the assistance of a mid-wife. We have three here, but it is not a profession. They just do it. The government has a certification program for mid-wives, but the people just do it themselves. It has to do with personality. This person is my friend, is closer to me."

"Do they use medicines?"

"They use chocolate to stimulate milk," Blanchard said, "but people die in childbirth."

Then talk turned to the cooperative's residents, where they came from, the effect of the war on their lives, and how the Dolores Medina cooperative started.

“Carlota, the woman of this house, was a rescuer in the mountains,” Blanchard said. “These women founded a refugee camp at Calle Real. They grew in strong leadership, and they got more land, some illegally, some at the tail-end of the land reform. This place was originally a garbage dump. It was bought from the Church. They took out a loan, built houses, moved into their homes, and one month later an earthquake destroyed everything they had built.”

“The people living here now come from the early revolutionary movement, from popular organizations, and from organizations within the Church. All revolutionary organizations go through crises and reforms. It is a delicate thing to ask the people about. But this is not a handout community. These people built this place by hand, they took out loans, and they will pay those loans back.”

“I need to check on the status of the rest of the day’s meetings,” Sinclair said, standing up and excusing himself. “If I don’t make it back by tomorrow . . .” he laughed, his voice trailing off.

“Earlier in the morning a woman was taken to the hospital with cholera,” Blanchard said, changing the conversation. “I want you to understand that she didn’t get it here. She works in the market. Which means that you should know that you don’t eat anything from the market.” Then he said, “I took shots for cholera, and I got cholera.”

“Yes,” Barker interjected. “The shots are only supposed to be about fifty percent effective.”

At that point, yesterday’s Embassy visit came up.

“Just look at the place,” said Gradie. “It is an imperialistic structure. It looks like a plantation house, a fortress.”

“I’ve got a story about that place,” Blanchard said. “The FMLN commander, Joaquín Villalobos, was given a tour of the U.S. Embassy and shown the extensive security measures. One member of the party said he thought the Embassy compound was ‘a monument to U.S. genius.’ Villalobos responded, ‘Actually, it is a monument to your stupidity.’”

“One of the big fallacies in this country,” said Blanchard, “is to train people to go out on their own. The result is they leave the

worker cooperatives. Here we train people to better the community instead of themselves. These people spent four or five years in refugee camps, and then they came here and worked for two years to create this place. You need to create the structure to allow people to work in the community. Otherwise it is like peeing in a river.”

He continued, “In this country, only big businesses can import. So we need to buy from our competitors. In other words, they have a preferred status. Supposedly, the peace accords have opened the importation business. Sure they have. They are supposed to have disbanded the National and Hacienda Police, as well.”

Ventura was speaking to the side with one of the women. “They got up at five o’clock to start our breakfast,” he announced, impressed.

“Your hosts wouldn’t have it any other way,” Blanchard said. “They take pride in serving the *Norte Americano* guests in their homes.”

With breakfast over, we sat on chairs and benches along the side walls of the small courtyard, and pulled out notepads and tape recorders. Then an anthropologist we had met at the National University joined us, her small child in tow. She was studying the Salvadoran people for a degree at Chapel Hill.

“I told them that you are going to be visiting the community today,” Blanchard said, “and that it might be helpful if they could develop a context for you to see where they came from. I also explained that I would explain to you that they are a little embarrassed to do this. They don’t think of themselves as special people, and they don’t understand why anyone would want to hear their stories.”

Carlota, her dark hair pulled tightly into a pony tail, spoke first. She avoided eye contact and looked up at the sky, her voice rising and falling.

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Carlota’s Story

We’ll talk a little bit about how we began to organize and to work in the struggle, from the place where we were. The first struggle to organize involved a meeting with a priest whose name was David. We said during these meetings that

in order to struggle to better ourselves we first of all needed to organize because the way that we lived was so terribly poor. We had to struggle to overcome great slavery, the slavery under which we lived. There were few who had much. And there were most of those who had nothing. There were days we had very little to eat, and there were days when we had nothing to eat.

“Let me translate,” Torriera said. “This is an extremely moving story. She’s explaining her life little by little, in pieces. It’s a continuation from her memory, things from the past. She is saying that they realized they had to organize, and she is talking about ‘they,’ ‘they,’ ‘they,’ and it’s confusing what she means by ‘they.’ But she says that they knew it was time to start a unified organizing to confront ‘they.’ They all had children, and the children had no time to be educated. And everyone had very little. They had the minimum of food. And then they realized that that was not enough, and that they could be organized. So all the children left, and they were not here any more. But they had nothing. So they had to bring them the things that they needed. So the women . . .”

“She is saying they incorporated into the army of the struggle,” Blanchard explained. “It’s a euphemism for saying her two boys entered the armed struggle as guerrillas.”

“That I understood,” said Torriera. “But it is very interesting the way she is presenting it, closing the eyes and bringing it back. It is extremely moving.”

We organized ourselves in the houses in order to provide them with food and other means of sustaining themselves. And “they,” being now the powerful, said that what we had set out to do was destroy the country.

The army said that they had to be destroyed, those who had fled to the mountains, because they were bad, and they were going to destroy the country. So the army came and they started to hunt the people who were in the mountains. And in the houses were many women and

children, and in the beginning at night or when the army was in bivouac, any time they could, they would hide some of them or they would give them things. But the moment the army found anyone, they would kill them. And many were killed.

Very soon the people realized that they couldn't stay because the army knew they were protecting the others. So when they heard that the army was coming, they ran into the mountains to hide. But some of the women had very small children and they couldn't hide very well. So the army found them, and over there where they found them, they killed them. The army went back and said that they caught such a number of *compañeros* of the guerrillas. But they were not guerrillas. They were women and children. And they were being killed. And many of the others, they just kept returning, and fighting and fighting.

Very soon the army came with tanks and they were bombing. We couldn't live in our houses anymore. And so the women came back to the houses, and the men didn't dare to come back. So the women were in the houses and they were working trying to get some food to feed the children as much as they could, but in most cases there was very little. Some of the men from time to time came down from the mountains to find out if there was anything for them to take. But they couldn't stay.

During this time the army came back every eight days, every fifteen days. Then the soldiers kept coming and saw the women without the men. "Where are your men?" they asked. We would tell them, "They are working the fields up in the mountains" or "They are working." Some of the women said, "We don't have husbands. We are alone." And the soldiers looked at the women, and said, "You are pregnant. Where are the men?" "They are not here." "We are going to kill you because you are lying," the soldiers said.

The soldiers realized that the women had brothers and husbands because they found clothing. So the women tried

to hide everything, but the soldiers realized that they were scared and that they were lying. The soldiers told them that if they kept lying they were going to be killed and when the husbands and children would come back, they would find just the corpses. They told the women to tell the men that they were soldiers in ARENA, and they were in that area.

Torriera was getting upset with what she was hearing. “I think for her this is extremely painful,” she said. “I don’t think we have the right to hear her. She is really suffering, remembering all of that.”

Carlota continued.

They were already concentrated up in the mountains and the army found them and attacked the families with bullets and grenades. Many were killed. It was a miracle that the others escaped just by running away in between the bullets and grenades.

On that day she lost six children. And she was running. In the next ten days she was able to come back to the houses with three of the children. Her daughter’s children had run in different directions, and they remained in the mountains for ten days without food and hardly any water.

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Next, Carlota’s daughter Deema took up the narrative. She spoke of herself, as “her daughter.” She was crying as she spoke.

Her daughter worked with young children, and two of her brothers helped her move further away from the area. One of the leaders of the young men told her that she couldn’t remain with so many young children because everybody would be in danger. They told her to get the children and live next to the road, so that after she would be able to return.

She was able to go to a man's house with the children. And the mother was able to reach that house and took the rest of her children, plus the oldest child of her daughter's. She remained in that house with the aunt with her child and baby. And the baby became very sick. The baby had measles. She was in the house and the baby died, and the father never saw the baby.

The mother had to leave this area because the soldiers were looking for her. So she went to a refugee camp with all the children. The daughter remained because someone had to stay with the father and the others. The daughter stayed there for over two months. And when the soldiers came, she realized that she had to leave also. After she left, the soldiers came and killed everyone in that house. Then they didn't know where to go. They went from place to place without having anything to eat. Until they heard about this community, and they came over here and they asked for help and to live in one of these houses, and that is how they came here.

When they came to this community, they started to feel much better because over here they found people who were trying to help them. In the beginning they were working with the men, organizing and everything and with other people also who were helping very, very much, and they started to make them feel much better. Now they have several places where they can work at different things, and the husbands and men in the community can work in construction. They have the capability that they could do work in construction. They have a building for carpentry, and a bakery, and many other areas they also can work in.

"I find it cruel," Torriera said. "We are causing these women pain when telling their stories. I think we should ask them if they want to continue talking."

"It is therapeutic for these people to tell their stories," the anthropologist said. Her small boy, bored with all the talking, fidgeted in his chair.

“Is your husband with you?” someone asked Carlota.

“My husband was for six years with the guerrillas.”

“He was in charge of services,” Blanchard interrupted. “In fact, he was with the commissariat. He worked for six years with the commissariat. Then he got arthritis, and he had to leave the guerrilla army and he came here with us.”

“This is an interesting case, if you want to see an organized family in a community,” Blanchard said. “That’s Carlota, the mother, and these are her two daughters. Juana is the president of the seamstress cooperative. Her husband is the president of the *directiva* of this community. Her sister is the treasurer of the seamstress cooperative, and her husband is the accountant and storekeeper of the construction workers’ cooperative. Her husband is from the same place, but they really got together here. One of Carlota’s sons is in the carpentry cooperative and is the chief painter and is the secretary of the carpenters’ cooperative, and the other brother is the treasurer of the construction workers’ cooperative and the mechanic. Her cousin is the treasurer of all the social-pastoral projects. Her father is the president of the credit union. Everything that we buy for the cooperative we are putting in his name.”

“This is an example of an interconnected family. Everybody is involved in some aspect of the organization. And that goes for her husband. Her daughter has now been incorporated into the carpentry shop, and her husband’s brothers are either in the carpentry or in the scholarship program. I mean, you start going like this through the networks, and they go all over the place. Carlota was the Harriet Tubman. She and her mother made repeated journeys back into the mountains to rescue people. She has photographs of the different disguises. She has millions of stories about how they smuggled stuff in and out.”

Blanchard stopped momentarily and looked at Torriera. “She does a great job,” he said, praising her translating ability. “Even with some of the expressions that she could not know. Sometimes I have to work backwards when I’m translating.”

“They are a family of twelve in this house,” Ventura announced, “and their expenses are about one thousand colones a month. And

it is very tight. They just about make enough money. They would like to go back to their original county where the land is better. But they cannot move because they cannot eat. They live day to day. But there is a desire to return to Chapeltique. They have some land there. They own a half acre.”

“We went back a month ago, but it was bittersweet,” Blanchard said. “It was a picnic, but it was going back to where the family had been killed. When we got there, the men could still climb the trees, but the children could not do it. They have lost some of their talents. They had become semi-rural. A generational shift has occurred. Carlota’s sons will never go back, except maybe in old age to return to the farm.”

I wondered about the people longing to return to their ancestral homes. Wouldn’t that bother Blanchard after working tirelessly to build this community for them in Dolores Medina? Apparently, it didn’t.

“Nema was one of the bravest young women in the community,” he said, referring Carlota’s other daughter. “Calle Real is in between Guazapa and San Salvador. If you want to use Biblical imagery. It’s the distance between Syria and Egypt.”

The Guazapa Blanchard referred to is a 4,620 foot jagged volcano, and during the war was a heavily bombed rebel stronghold in central El Salvador. The mountain’s highest point was maintained by the army manning a radio station, while the lower ground was guerrilla territory.

“All of the armed forces were concentrated after 1984 when the FMLN continued to overrun their positions in the countryside,” Blanchard said. “Nema went to a refugee camp, and she left immediately to enter into the war. She was recruited at the age of fifteen for what they call ‘special operations,’ which was going into places with dynamite, and stuff like that. She didn’t like that, and she became a medi-corps personnel. And when they invaded Chalatenango, Nema led thirty young women across the mountain of San Salvador all the way to Chalatenango, all the way through those hills. Nema has absolutely no self-confidence. Nema thinks of herself as ugly, because she is brown-skinned. She thinks of herself as stupid because she is not educated.”

“I don’t know why you are telling us that,” said Torriera.

“Because this is the double, triple poverty of the Salvadoran women. They are victims of poverty. And they are victims of their own self debasement.”

I was shocked. Nema looked like a modern-day Madonna.